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Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

In the present report, the challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls are examined in the context of the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (General Assembly resolution 70/1). The prevailing gender inequalities in rural areas that compromise the livelihoods, well-being and resilience of rural women and girls are also examined. The challenges and opportunities facing rural women and girls are addressed in terms of realizing their rights to an adequate standard of living, to a life free of violence and harmful practices and to land and productive assets, food security and nutrition, education and health, inclusive of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Policies and actions to achieve gender equality and rural women's and girls' empowerment and human rights are outlined in the report, and the need is expressed for greater commitment to ensuring that no rural woman or girl is left behind. Recommendations for consideration by the Commission on the Status of Women are set out in the final section of the report.

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I. Introduction

1. The Commission on the Status of Women, at its sixty-second session, in 2018, will consider the priority theme "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls", in accordance with its multi-year programme of work for the period 2017–2019. The theme is addressed in the present report in terms of the realization of the human rights of rural women and girls everywhere, which are necessary for their livelihoods, well-being and resilience. This is particularly urgent given that virtually every gender and development indicator for which data are available reveals that, globally, rural women fare worse than rural men and urban women.[1] Those rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

2. The empowerment of rural women and girls and the realization of their human rights and gender equality are essential to the achievement of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals therein. Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (Goal 5) in rural areas around the globe is clearly linked to all other Goals and targets, including ending poverty in all its forms (Goal 1), eradicating hunger, achieving food security, improving nutrition and promoting sustainable agriculture (Goal 2), achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all (Goal 8) and taking action to combat climate change (Goal 13). These Goals and targets encompass a number of rights that are essential to the livelihoods, well-being and resilience of rural women and girls in both developing and developed countries. Such rights include the right to land and land tenure security; to food and nutrition of adequate quality and quantity; to live a life free of all forms of violence, discrimination and harmful practices; to the highest attainable standard of health, including sexual and reproductive health and rights; and to quality, affordable and accessible education throughout the life cycle.

3. The 20-year review in 2015 of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action brought renewed attention to the urgency of eradicating poverty and improving the livelihoods, well-being and resilience of rural women and girls. It highlighted the need to realize the human rights of rural women and girls by eliminating geographic and gender inequalities in access to essential services and infrastructure, productive resources, land tenure security, food security and nutrition and income security and social protection (see E/CN.6/2015/3). Those issues were also addressed by the Commission at its sixtieth and sixty-first sessions (see E/2016/27 and E/2017/27).

4. Other recent normative advances, including the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (see FCCC/CP/2015/10/Add.1), the New Urban Agenda (General Assembly resolution 71/256) and the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (Assembly resolution 71/1), contribute to the improvement of the situation of rural women and girls.

[1] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *State of Food and Agriculture: Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security* (Rome, 2016), p. 49.

5. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in its general recommendation No. 34 (2016) on the rights of rural women (CEDAW/C/GC/34), called upon States to uphold those rights. The Committeee emphasized that rural women faced structural barriers to the full enjoyment of their human rights, which were overlooked or incompletely addressed in laws, policies, budgets, investments and interventions at all levels across countries. It noted that rural women tended to be excluded from leadership and decision-making and were disproportionately affected by poverty and unequal access to land and natural resources, infrastructure and services and decent work and social protection. It also noted that the contribution of the paid and unpaid work of rural women and girls to gross domestic product and sustainable development was only partially recognized. Because of prevailing discriminatory gender norms, rural women and girls tended to be less educated than men and boys, with less access to information, skills, training and labour markets, while facing greater risks of violence, child, early and forced marriage and harmful practices. Those conditions were exacerbated by rural women's and girls' limited access to justice and lack of effective legal, juridical and institutional remedies, especially in cases of conflicting statutory and customary laws, authorities and jurisdictions.

6. Rural women and girls face multiple and intersecting inequalities and forms of discrimination as young women and girls, older women, heads of households, indigenous women, women affected by HIV/AIDS, women with disabilities and migrants, refugees and internally-displaced persons, and may be particularly subject to violence and exclusion. Their circumstances also vary according to their location, income, race/ethnicity, culture and sexual orientation and gender identity. That complexity influences their decision-making power and exercise of voice and agency and enables or constrains their access to land and productive resources, food security and nutrition and education and health services. Different groups of rural women and girls have particular needs and priorities, warranting tailored policy and institutional responses.

7. Achieving the Goals and realizing the human rights of rural women and girls require renewed commitments, increased investments and significantly greater financing from all sources, including official development assistance and national Governments. Effective macroeconomic policies should manage the impact of international investment and trade rules that compromise rural women's and girls' smallholder agricultural production and food security and nutrition. Legal and policy reforms should strengthen rural women's and girls' land rights and land tenure security and their equitable access to productive resources and markets and encourage urban-rural interaction and connectivity. Fiscal policies that facilitate investment in essential infrastructure (sustainable energy, sustainable transport and safely managed water and sanitation), services (care, education, health, including sexual and reproductive health, and prevention and response to violence against women and girls) and universal social protection will improve livelihoods, well-being and resilience while reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work. Targeted labour market policies should support the creation of decent jobs with living wages and rural women's agricultural and non-agricultural employment. Technological innovations can facilitate rural women's and girls' digital fluency, financial literacy and skills development and support their labour market entry and livelihoods. Taken together, such measures contribute to gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls.

8. The present report reflects the findings of the expert group meeting on theme "Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of

rural women and girls", convened by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) from 20 to 22 September 2017 in Rome. The report is informed by General Assembly resolution 72/148, and the report of the Secretary-General on the improvement of the situation of women and girls in rural areas (A/72/207) and by recent research and data from United Nations entities and other sources.

II. Attaining the right to an adequate standard of living

9. A decade after the onset of the financial, food and climate crises, rural areas continue to be affected by slow or stagnant economic growth, unstable food prices and demand, extreme weather events, worsening political and violent conflicts and humanitarian crises. As of 2016, less than half of the world's population (46 per cent) was rural, owing to the dynamics of urbanization and migration in the context of climate change, environmental degradation (deforestation, desertification and loss of agricultural biodiversity) and unsustainable agricultural and land use practices.[2] The globalization of agrifood chains and large-scale domestic and foreign investment in land and biofuels present new risks for rural women and men and demand new responses.[3]

10. Owing to gender and geographic inequalities, rural women and girls are disproportionately affected by poverty, exclusion and the effects of environmental and climate change. The majority of the 1 billion people who continue to live in unacceptable conditions of poverty and food insecurity are heavily concentrated in rural areas and are predominantly smallholder farmers and agricultural and informal workers with little or no social protection. Persistent barriers to accessing information, technology, financing and markets — in particular in the context of a changing climate with concomitant droughts, floods, land degradation and water scarcity — pose risks for agricultural productivity and food security. This is especially the case for women farmers, who may be as productive and enterprising as their male counterparts, but are even less able to access land, credit, agricultural inputs, climate and weather information, markets and high-value agrifood chains, compromising their productivity and incomes.[4] Policies and investments are needed to close such gender gaps in agriculture and the rural economy to end poverty and hunger and combat climate change (Goals 1, 2 and 13).

11. Women's employment in agriculture remains significant, although it has declined considerably over the past two decades as women transition to work in the manufacturing and service sectors. Globally, almost one third of employed women work in agriculture, including forestry and fishing, but that figure may exclude self-employed and unpaid family workers. Yet differences across countries and regions are striking. The share of women workers employed in agriculture is only 9.5 per cent in upper-middle income countries and 2.6 per cent in high income countries, while agriculture remains the most important employment sector for women in low income and lower-middle income countries. In Latin America and the Caribbean, women's

[2] World Bank estimates for 2016. Available from http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS.

[3] International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), *Rural Development Report 2016: Fostering Inclusive Rural Transformation* (Rome, 2016).

[4] Ibid.

employment in agriculture has fallen to about 10 per cent, but in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, over 60 per cent of all working women remain employed in agriculture, concentrated in time- and labour-intensive, informal and poorly paid activities with little social protection or income security.[5]

12. The majority of rural jobs for women are in the informal economy, whether in the plantation sector and global agrifood chains or in increasingly important non-farm employment. Rural women workers also include those who have migrated within and across national borders, trafficked workers and those in forced labour and debt bondage. Child labour is prevalent in rural areas and girls form a significant part of the agricultural workforce. In general, the right of rural women and girls to an adequate standard of living is jeopardized by ubiquitous low-paid, low-quality jobs, widespread casualization, poor working conditions, limited access to social protection and the lack of collective voice and agency as organized workers. They are often not covered by international or national labour standards in law or practice.[6] Gender discrimination and occupational segregation perpetuate the gender pay gap and inhibit upward mobility for rural women workers. The pay gap between men and women doing the same work can be as high as 40 per cent.[7] In line with Goal 8, improving the quality and quantity of decent jobs with social protection and freedom of association must be a policy priority if poverty is to be eradicated and an adequate standard of living with empowerment and dignity is to be attained by rural women and girls.

13. While their contributions to rural economies and societies in both developing and developed countries may be increasingly recognized, rural women's and girls' rights and priorities remain insufficiently realized. Rural women are underrepresented in local and national institutions and governance mechanisms and tend to have less voice, agency and decision-making power in households and society more broadly. For example, in the majority of the 68 countries with data available, rural women were less likely than urban women to decide how their incomes would be spent.[8] Rural women and girls continue to perform multiple productive and reproductive roles in families and communities. Much of their labour remains unpaid and unrecognized, including disproportionate shares of unpaid care and domestic work, upon which their households and national economies depend.[9]

14. Analysis of time use surveys suggests that rural women generally spend more time on unpaid work than rural men and urban women and men, reflecting both gender inequalities and the lack of public investment in poor rural areas. Unpaid work includes care work (such as caring for children, the elderly and the ill), domestic work (such as cooking, cleaning and washing clothes), agricultural work (for example, in subsistence agriculture or on family farms) and tasks such as collecting water and fuel.[10] Emerging evidence suggests that girls spend more time on unpaid care and

[5] International Labour Organization (ILO), *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016); ILOSTAT, 2017.

[6] ILO, "Decent work on plantations" (Geneva, 2017); ILO, *Freedom of Association for Women Rural Workers* (Geneva, 2012).

[7] FAO, IFAD and ILO, *Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differentiated Pathways out of Poverty — Status, Trends and Gaps* (Rome, 2010).

[8] UN-Women analysis of data from the Demographic and Health Surveys Programme "STATcompiler". Data available from www.statcompiler.com/en/ (accessed November 2017).

[9] IFAD, *Rural Development Report 2016: Fostering Inclusive Rural Transformation*.

[10] Jacques Charmes, "Time use across the world: findings of a world compilation of time use surveys", United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report Office Background Paper (UNDP, 2015); Debbie Budlender, ed. *Time Use Studies and Unpaid Care Work* (New York, Routledge, 2010).

domestic work and less time on paid work than boys in rural areas.[11] Public policies and investments are needed to capture the contributions of rural women's and girls' unpaid work to national economies and to promote gender equality by recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work. In line with 5.4, that entails investments in infrastructure and services (sustainable transport, sustainable energy, safely managed water and sanitation, childcare, eldercare and health care) and policies that support the transformation of discriminatory gender norms and practices in the household and society.

15. Improving access to productive resources and financial services, including credit, loans and saving schemes, is vital for low-income self-employed rural women and smallholder farmers. Incentives can be created to facilitate rural women's access to markets through public procurement and having them provision school meal programmes and provide other services. Well-designed and regulated microfinance and financial services provided by the non-profit sector, as well as gender-responsive financial products and delivery offered by some financial institutions and rural banks, can enhance rural women's economic security. Their success largely depends on the integration of different kinds of support and services, including training and skills development, mentorship and solidarity, and engagement with the wider community, which promote rural women's rights, empowerment and ability to shape related policies and practices.[12]

16. Increased connectivity and mobile phone technology can provide women farmers with information about weather and climate, crop prices and market conditions. Together with mobile banking, they are credited with fomenting rural women's enterprises in many countries. Similarly, in the sustainable energy sector, rapidly declining costs for renewable energy technologies have allowed growing numbers of rural women to earn an income by selling solar lighting, improved cookstoves and other clean energy equipment in remote, off-grid locations. The acquisition of such devices by rural women has had multiple benefits, ranging from allowing children and others to study and read at night to reducing household air pollution and the associated harmful health impacts by cooking with clean cookstoves and fuels.

17. Beyond such small-scale activities, decentralized sustainable energy solutions can be very significant in supporting the livelihoods, well-being and climate resilience of rural women and girls. Rural women's enterprises and cooperatives are becoming involved in installing and managing decentralized mini-grids, powered by solar — or other forms of renewable energy, that supply electricity for both household and productive uses in rural areas that are not served by national electricity grids. Solar-powered pumps provide water for irrigation and have the potential to ensure crop yields and food security for women farmers in different geographical settings and climatic conditions. Solar dryers, microhydro grain mills, solar grinders and solar refrigeration systems are important technologies for agrifood processing, storage and adding value to products. They help to decrease food waste and improve food security, while reducing the labour and time spent, for example, by women in manual processing and collecting water. To realize these benefits, women farmers and rural women's enterprises and cooperatives need support in a number of ways, including

[11] Leyla Karimli and others, "Factors and norms influencing unpaid care work: household survey evidence from five rural communities in Colombia, Ethiopia, the Philippines, Uganda and Zimbabwe" (Oxfam, 2017).

[12] ILO, Women at Work: Trends 2016; UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights* (New York, 2015).

through appropriate technology transfer, credit and financing and information and training to acquire, manage and use sustainable energy technologies.

18. Extending social protection to all rural women and girls can help them to attain an adequate standard of living. A universal social protection floor, as a human right, ensures basic income security and access to services, especially health care. Public works programmes, guaranteed rural employment schemes and conditional cash transfers are important in situations of social, economic or environmental crisis or chronic unemployment. Instituted as temporary measures, they may turn into more permanent sources of income. Guaranteed rural employment schemes that are designed with gender equality in wages and that take into account women's dual responsibility for reproductive and productive work can benefit rural women more than incomes as agricultural labourers, especially if on-site childcare, reduced work times and less physically demanding tasks are provided for women. Conditional cash transfers, which are predicated on compliance with minimum requirements, including with respect to children's school attendance, regular health care visits and improved family nutrition, have more lasting benefits if support services and training for rural women are provided and if payments are directly deposited into their bank accounts.[13]

19. Rural women's civil society organizations, enterprises and cooperatives are critical in gathering and uniting rural women, supporting their voice, agency and representation in the political and economic spheres, claiming their rights and allowing them to influence the decisions and institutions that affect their lives and livelihoods. Rural women in producer cooperatives can pool their labour, resources, assets and knowledge, thereby increasing their bargaining power to better access and use financing, technology and markets, including through fair trade networks. Rural women's cooperatives can more effectively participate in local markets, supply chains and government procurement, with the potential for greater incomes for their members than for women who are not similarly organized.[14] Rural women's enterprises and cooperatives can also provide social and care services to compensate for the lack of social protection coverage in rural areas.[15]

III. Ensuring the rights of rural women to land and land tenure security

20. For rural women and men, rights to land and natural resources are fundamental, and land is perhaps the most important household asset. Yet women farmers have significantly less access to, control over and ownership of land and other productive assets compared with their male counterparts. The rights of rural women to land are compromised by inadequate legal and policy frameworks, ineffective implementation at the national and local levels and discriminatory gender norms and practices, which targets 5.1. and 5.a are aimed at redressing.

21. Agricultural censuses and household surveys have provided only incomplete sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics on women's ownership, use and control of land and agricultural holdings. The FAO Gender and Land Rights Database, drawing on agricultural census data, indicates that less than 20 per cent of landholders

[13] UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016*.

[14] High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, "Leave no one behind: a call to action for gender equality and women's economic empowerment" (2016).

[15] ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*; ILO, *Providing Care through Cooperatives: Survey and Interview Findings* (Geneva, 2016).

worldwide are women, although there are wide regional variations. Based on data for 161 countries, only in 37 per cent of those countries do women and men have equal rights to own, use and control land. In 59 per cent of those countries, while the law guarantees women and men the same rights, customary and religious practices often discriminate against women and undermine the full implementation of national legal codes. In the remaining 4 per cent of those countries, women explicitly have no legal right to own, use or control land.[16]

22. The land rights of rural women encompass ownership, control, access and use of land and its resources in diverse land tenure systems, including community, customary, collective, joint and individual tenure. Not only do women have fewer land rights than men, but they are often restricted to so-called secondary land rights, meaning that they hold rights through male family members and risk losing those rights in the case of divorce, widowhood or the migration of the male relative. The land rights of most women are curtailed by customary law even when recognized by statutory law or as part of legal reforms. Women are susceptible to dispossession because they lack inheritance rights; when a male spouse dies, the rights of his male relatives often prevail over those of his widow. Women rarely have full and direct rights to land, but must negotiate as secondary claimants through a male relative.[17]

23. In many countries, rural land is often undocumented, making it highly vulnerable to land grabs and expropriation and making local communities vulnerable to dispossession and displacement with little or no compensation. The lack of effective and transparent land governance means that customary, communal and individual land rights are unregistered, unrecognized and unprotected in the face of the large-scale land acquisitions associated with foreign direct investment in recent years, which threaten to jeopardize local agricultural livelihoods and food security. Women farmers, in particular, are disproportionately affected by large-scale land grabs and dispossession because of their unequal access and control over land and productive assets, coupled with limited mobility and decision-making power in the household and the community (see A/69/156).

24. In the 2030 Agenda, Member States set out seven targets and six indicators on land rights and land tenure security across the Goals, progress against which is to be measured and monitored through sex-disaggregated data. Three indicators are particularly relevant to women's land rights and land tenure security: indicator 1.4.2, on secure land rights; indicator 5.a.1, on rights over agricultural land; and indicator 5.a.2, on legal frameworks, including customary law, that guarantee women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control over land.

25. The land tenure security of rural women can be strengthened through gender-responsive legal reforms, asset transfer programmes and land titling. The reform of inheritance and marital laws that discriminate against women and girls is central. Marital regimes with joint or common property, as opposed to those with separation of property, tend to favour women's land rights, as do equal inheritance rights for daughters and sons. Asset transfer programmes that allocate land to women-headed households or make provisions for land titling in the names of women or joint titling

[16] FAO Gender and Land Rights Database. Available from www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/en/; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Social Institutions and Gender Index. Available from www.genderindex.org.

[17] Carmen Diana Deere and others, "Women's land ownership and participation in agricultural decision-making: evidence from Ecuador, Ghana and Karnataka, India", Research Brief Series, No. 2 (Bangalore, Indian Institute of Management, 2013); FAO, "Gender and land rights," Economic and Social Perspectives, policy brief No. 8 (Rome, 2010).

in the names of couples may increase women's land tenure security and allow them to access credit and other productive resources. Collective land tenure or ownership by women's organizations or farmer cooperatives is another means to increase access by women to, ownership of and control over land and related production.[18]

26. Because of complex and overlapping land tenure and governance systems at the local and national levels, land reforms are difficult to plan and implement. Gender-responsive land laws, policies, regulations and procedures need to be supported by the voice, agency and representation of women at all levels of governance, including parliaments, administrative services and land committees. The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security can be an effective tool to advance rural women's land rights and land tenure security. Rural women's organizations, together with gender equality advocates in Government and civil society, can help raise women's legal literacy and awareness of their entitlements and redress discriminatory social norms. Such organizations have mobilized effectively to pursue legal, policy, institutional and social reforms in favour of women's land rights in countries worldwide, although the evidence is mixed regarding the ongoing impact of their results.[19]

27. Ensuring women's rights to land and other productive resources is correlated with improved household welfare and a broad range of benefits for rural women and girls. Women acquire more decision-making power and economic independence in their families, households and communities. The elimination of laws and practices that disadvantage women compared with men with respect to access to land, property and other productive resources could also help to reduce intimate partner violence.[20] Secure land tenure increases the social and political status of women and offers an avenue to economic justice. By diminishing the threats of displacement, dispossession, food insecurity and poverty, secure land rights and land tenure can boost women's bargaining power in the home and strengthen their participation in economic and public life.

IV. Strengthening food security and nutrition for rural women and girls

28. The fulfilment of the right of rural women and girls to food and nutrition of adequate quality and quantity is critical. Yet rural women and girls continue to suffer from food insecurity and malnutrition, with the number of chronically undernourished people increasing globally, in large part owing to conflicts, humanitarian crises and climate-related shocks, such as droughts or floods. Food security has deteriorated in commodity export-dependent countries, where steep declines in export and fiscal revenues in recent years have resulted in reduced imports and fiscal capacity to protect poor households from rising domestic food prices. Globally, women are

[18] Abena Oduro, "Control and ownership of assets: a means for increasing gender equality and empowerment of rural women". Background paper for the expert group meeting of the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women, (2017); UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016*.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Lori L. Heise and Andreas Kotsadam, "Cross-national and multilevel correlates of partner violence: an analysis of data from population-based surveys," *The Lancet Global Health*, vol. 3, No. 6 (June 2015), pp. e332–e340. Available from http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2214-109X(15)00013-3.

slightly more likely to experience food insecurity than men. Although the proportion is declining, nearly one of every four children worldwide is stunted, which increases the risks of impaired cognitive ability, poor school and work performance and death from infections. A third of women of reproductive age worldwide suffer from anaemia, threatening their own health and their children's nutrition and health.[21]

29. In this context, nutritional empowerment, which focuses on quality nutrition for the survival and well-being of women and their children, becomes key. Interventions to enhance agricultural and food production do not always translate into improved nutritional outcomes. In particular, development interventions promoting the economic empowerment of women that focus exclusively on income-generating opportunities and increasing agricultural productivity may inadvertently increase the work burden of rural women (both on farm and off-farm, paid and unpaid), thereby undermining their health and nutrition. Nutritional empowerment entails assessing the structural factors, constraints and norms that may prevent rural women from achieving adequate nutritional outcomes and providing targeted policy responses to improve their nutritional security and health.[22]

30. In the 2030 Agenda, in particular Goal 2, Member States addressed the structural barriers that place rural women and girls at a disadvantage in their realization of food security and nutrition. A recent assessment of progress indicates, however, that it is unlikely that hunger and malnutrition will be eradicated by 2030 unless more coordinated efforts and greater investments are made to respond effectively to food crises around the world. Doing so would entail expanding decent work and social protection in rural areas, increasing agricultural productivity and smallholder incomes, supporting smallholder sustainable agriculture and food production systems and conserving and equitably sharing the benefits of agricultural biodiversity. It would also entail negotiating trade rules that protect domestic policy space for agricultural development and food security, while prioritizing women's empowerment and gender equality (see A/72/303).

31. Rural women farmers are increasingly engaged in sustainable agriculture, practicing agroecological and climate-resilient agricultural methods for food security and nutrition. For that to come to fruition, they need to be formally recognized as producers in their own right and to participate in decision-making in producer cooperatives, land governance and water management committees. It is crucial that rural women be empowered to convene and participate in local and national policy dialogues and engage with decision-makers. Public and private investment in rural women's producer organizations is necessary to enable climate-resilient and diversified production and commercialization of crops. Local and national funding mechanisms need to be established to promote rural women's organic farming and agroecological methods. These include ancestral, indigenous and modern technological practices that are climate-resilient and protect ecosystems and agricultural biodiversity and that strengthen food security and nutrition.[23]

[21] FAO, IFAD, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Food Programme and World Health Organization (WHO), *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2017: Building Resilience for Peace and Food Security* (Rome, 2017).

[22] Sudha Narayanan and others, "Rural women's empowerment in nutrition: a proposal for diagnostics linking food, health and institutions". Background paper for the expert group meeting of the sixty-second session of the Commission on the Status of Women (2017).

[23] Huairou Commission, "Rural women's empowerment in the sustainable development era", (2017).

V. Addressing violence and harmful practices against rural women and girls

32. Violence against women and girls is a significant human rights violation in all countries, the elimination of which is highlighted in Goal 5, target 2. Violence occurs in private and public places and takes many forms. Globally, over one third of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner, or sexual violence from a non-partner, at some point in their lives.[24] Although data is not available for all countries, of the 48 countries with recent data on physical or sexual violence committed by a husband/partner in the past 12 months, 26 countries showed higher rates in rural areas than in urban areas.[25] In North America, the information available indicates that the rates of intimate partner violence tend to be similar in rural, urban and suburban areas, but some types of intimate partner violence (sexual, chronic and severe violence and homicide) may be higher in rural areas.[26]

33. The elimination of harmful practices in rural areas (target 5.3) is also difficult to gauge because of incomplete data. Despite an overall decline in the prevalence of female genital mutilation over the past three decades, it is still practiced in 29 countries concentrated in Africa and the Middle East, and, given migration flows, affects girls and women worldwide. An estimated 200 million women and girls, 44 million of whom are under 15 years of age, have been subjected to the practice, in most countries before the age of 5. In 22 of the 29 countries, female genital mutilation may be more common in rural areas, based on data on girls and women 15 to 49 years of age. For girls under 14 years of age, as reported by their mothers, the practice may also be more common in rural areas than urban areas in 15 of the 20 countries with data available. More support for the continuation of female genital mutilation appears to exist in rural areas, although there is wide variation among countries with respect to the extent of support for the practice.[27]

34. The incidence of child, early and forced marriage has declined globally, but over 700 million women and 150 million men alive today were married as children. Each year, some 15 million girls are married before they reach 18 years of age, many of whom are from the poorest households in rural sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. In Africa, the level of child marriage among the poorest has not changed since 1990, and the countries with the highest numbers of child marriages are in South Asia. Girls with little schooling are up to six times more likely to be married as children than girls with secondary education. Girls in the poorest 20 per cent of the population and those living in rural areas are the most at risk. Worldwide, rural girls are more likely to marry than their urban counterparts, with about twice as many rural child marriages as urban child marriages in some countries in West and Central Africa and in Latin America and the Caribbean.[28]

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[24] *The World's Women 2015: Trends and Statistics* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.15.XVII.8), chap. 6.

[25] UN-Women analysis of data from the Demographic and Health Surveys Programme "STATcompiler".

[26] Katie M. Edwards, "Intimate partner violence and the rural–urban–suburban divide: myth or reality? A critical review of the literature", *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, vol. 16, No. 3 (2015), pp. 359-373.

[27] UN-Women assessment of UNICEF data. Available from https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/female-genital-mutilation-and-cutting/ (accessed November 2017); UNICEF, "Female genital mutilation/cutting: a global concern" (2016).

[28] UNICEF, "Ending child marriage: progress and prospects" (2014); UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2016: A Fair Chance for Every Child* (New York, 2016).

35. Child and early marriage has clear implications for the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls. These include a lack of information, adequate health care and decision-making power with regard to safe sex and family planning; early pregnancy and childbearing before girls' bodies are fully mature, with greater risks of complications, which are the second leading cause of death for girls between ages 15 and 19; and vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV.[29] Child and early marriage also compromises the agency and mental well-being of women and girls and increases their vulnerability to domestic violence, in particular in the context of forced marriage.[30]

36. Large-scale public awareness and advocacy initiatives are needed across rural areas to change practices and attitudes in relation to intimate partner violence against women, child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation and should target women and girls as well as men and boys. Other preventative measures to address violence and harmful practices against women and girls include increasing access by girls and young people to education, empowering them with knowledge and skills and empowering parents and communities to abandon harmful practices. Economic incentives, such as conditional cash transfers, may be effective in reducing child marriage and child labour and in increasing girls' attendance in school. Strengthening and enforcing laws and policies against violence against women and harmful practices is critical, as is enacting and implementing laws that set the minimum age of marriage at 18 for both girls and boys. Rural women and girls who are subjected to violence and harmful practices must be assured access to essential social, health and justice services.[31] Mobile technologies have been helpful in some cases in creating remote help desks for rural women and girls who have suffered violence, and in alerting police officers and health workers who can investigate and provide emotional and medical support. Similarly, mobile hotlines help to support girls confronting female genital mutilation and, in both cases, can support the prosecution of crimes and the delivery of justice.[32]

VI. Ensuring access to health care and sexual and reproductive health and rights

37. Ensuring access to quality essential health-care services (Goal 3, target 8) and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights (Goal 5, target 6) are necessary in order to realize the right of rural women and girls to the highest attainable standard of health. Distance from health facilities and qualified health professionals is a serious concern for rural women and girls. Inability to access health facilities is a more serious issue for women and girls in rural areas than in urban areas, as indicated by data available for 62 countries, in particular with respect to sexual and reproductive health. In the least developed countries, a rural woman is 38 per cent less likely than an urban woman to give birth with the assistance of a skilled health professional. Maternal deaths, many of which are preventable, are

[29] Ibid.

[30] Sama-Resource Group for Women and Health, "Dataspeak: early marriage and health" (2015).

[31] UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2016*; UNICEF, "Ending child marriage"; UN-Women and others, "Essential services package for women and girls subject to violence" (2015).

[32] Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, "Working Group on Education: digital skills for life and work" (Paris, UNESCO, 2017); Health and Education Advice and Resource Team, "Helpdesk report: increasing access to sexual and reproductive health and rights via new innovations and technologies in Africa" (2015).

linked to inadequate health services for women and girls, in particular for the poorest and those living in rural areas.[33]

38. Death and disease associated with lack of access to safe and reliable water and sanitation disproportionately affect poor rural women and girls. Although 6.6 billion people had access to an improved drinking water source in 2015, the availability of safely managed drinking water remains low, at an estimated 68 per cent in urban areas and only 20 per cent in rural areas. The dearth of safely managed water and sanitation and the practice of open defecation occur primarily in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. The poorest in rural areas suffer most, especially women and girls who are subject to adverse pregnancy outcomes, maternal mortality, violence and psychosocial stress. Menstrual hygiene management is also difficult in the absence of water, soap and sanitation facilities, whether at home, school or work. Achieving universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water and adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and ending open defecation (Goal 6, targets 1 and 2) necessitates policies and programmes that prioritize rural women and girls and address critical geographical, gender and health inequalities.[34]

39. The lack of access to information and services relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights is particularly acute for rural women, especially young women and girls. Globally, the unmet need for family planning affects the lives of 214 million women in developing countries. Rural areas show greater unmet need than urban areas, according to data available for some 77 countries.[35] Multiple mobile health applications, for example those which support prenatal care, have helped in some instances to increase access by rural women and girls to information and services relating to sexual and reproductive health and rights. Mobile phone clinics and telemedicine consultations have been deployed in some countries to reach rural women and girls, and mobile learning platforms have been deployed to train health workers and professionals on relevant topics.[36] Rural women and girls need the resources and opportunity to manage their own sexual and reproductive health and exercise their reproductive rights, while being supported in a number of ways, including through comprehensive sexuality education. Otherwise, they will be at a great disadvantage when it comes to attaining an education, earning a living and enjoying a healthy and productive life.[37]

VII. Providing quality education for rural girls and women

40. Realizing the right of rural women and girls to quality, affordable and accessible education throughout the life cycle is at the core of attaining Goal 4. Despite the gains made in achieving gender parity in primary school enrolment in developing countries, much remains to be done to reach universal primary school completion, in particular in rural areas. Progress towards gender parity in school is offset by persistent gender-based discrimination and stereotypes in text books, curricula, teaching

[33] UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016*.

[34] Joanna Esteves Mills and Oliver Cumming, "The impact of water, sanitation and hygiene on key health and social outcomes: review of evidence" (UNICEF, 2016).

[35] WHO family planning/contraception fact sheet 2017. Available from www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs351/en/. UN-Women analysis of data from the Demographic and Health Surveys Programme "STATcompiler".

[36] Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, "Working Group on Education".

[37] Development Assistance Committee Network on Gender Equality, "Women's economic empowerment" (OECD, 2012).

methodologies, access to infrastructure, including information and communications technology (ICT), and practices and behaviours within and outside educational settings, all of which tend to be more pronounced in rural areas. The multiple and intersecting inequalities and forms of discrimination experienced by rural women and girls put them at great disadvantage in terms of schooling, literacy and adult education. Poverty and location are factors that determine whether girls go to school, with the poorest girls in rural areas at the greatest risk of exclusion from school. Of particular concern for rural girls is the persistent and widespread lack of qualified teachers in rural areas, especially when it comes to the preparation, recruitment and retention of women teachers (see A/72/207).

41. Ensuring access by rural women and girls to ICT may help to deliver skills, information and knowledge that they urgently need for their livelihoods, well-being and resilience. Even as mobile technologies become more prevalent, the digital divide remains a gendered one: most of the 3.9 billion people who are offline are in rural areas and are poorer, less educated and tend to be women and girls. The cost of owning and using a mobile phone is a significant barrier, in particular for women in rural areas of South Asia, East Asia and the Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa. Although the use of ICT for learning has gained ground in schools worldwide, the digital divide may be particularly intractable in the case of mobile learning opportunities for poor rural girls. Many schools in rural areas lack both electricity and computers, and the situation is likely worse in terms of access to ICT outside school for rural girls in poor households that have neither. Mobile phones may be a more accessible alternative, but the evidence is not yet clear on the relative effectiveness of such devices to support learning and reduce gender disparities in primary and secondary education. [38]

42. Poor rural young women tend to be significantly less literate than the rural average. In the majority of countries with data, less than half of poor rural women have basic literacy skills. Mobile technologies can potentially enhance literacy, but multiple challenges must be addressed in order for rural women to engage in mobile learning. Access to mobile phones can be stymied by cost and complications relating to connectivity in remote rural areas, but sharing mobile phones could reduce costs and increase collaborative learning. More daunting are the discriminatory gender norms and practices that limit women's use of mobile phones for learning. Engaging men and the wider community and making mobile literacy content relevant to learners' communities and livelihoods in local languages may be helpful. [39] Greater and more systematic investments are called for to achieve universal free public primary and secondary education for all and to provide educational facilities in rural areas with qualified teachers at all levels of instruction.

VIII. Conclusions and recommendations

43. **Gender equality and the empowerment and human rights of rural women and girls are essential for the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The fulfilment of the rights of rural women and girls to an adequate standard of living, to a life free of violence and harmful practices and to land and productive assets, food security and nutrition, decent work, education and health, inclusive of sexual and reproductive health and rights, is**

[38] UNESCO, *Global Education Monitoring Report 2016: Gender Review* (Paris, 2016).

[39] Ibid.; Carolina Rekalcazar, *Mobile Phones & Literacy: Empowerment in Women's Hands* (Paris, UNESCO, 2015).

fundamental. Renewed commitments, improved policies and their rigorous implementation, and greater financing from all sources, including increased official development assistance, are required in order to leave no rural woman or girl behind.

44. Efforts need to be made by all stakeholders to support the livelihoods, well-being and resilience of rural women and girls and to eliminate structural barriers and discriminatory laws and gender norms to enable rural women and girls to respond to challenges and seize opportunities for change. Policies and programmes should promote the sustainable smallholder production of rural women and girls, as well as decent farm and non-farm work and access to social protection. Their unpaid work should be recognized and counted, and their unpaid care and domestic work reduced and redistributed through the provision of infrastructure and services. The rights of rural women and girls to land tenure security, food security and nutrition need to be supported and protected from economic, social and environmental shocks and stresses. Violence and harmful practices against rural women and girls must be eliminated. The delivery of safely managed water and sanitation, and education and health-care services, inclusive of sexual and reproductive health and rights, needs to be strengthened. The promise of ICT and sustainable energy technologies should be fulfilled, including through appropriate technology transfer. Support for rural women's civil society organizations, enterprises and cooperatives is critical in realizing the human rights and empowerment of rural women and girls and their effective participation in public debates and policy processes.

45. To achieve gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls and their human rights, the Commission on the Status of Women may wish to urge Governments and other stakeholders to take the action set out below.

Strengthen normative and legal frameworks and eliminate laws and policies that discriminate against rural women and girls

(a) Take action on existing commitments and obligations with respect to the realization of gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls and their full enjoyment of all their human rights, which constitute an integrated framework that leaves no rural women or girls behind;

(b) Strengthen and enforce laws, policies and regulations that prohibit discrimination against rural women and girls; implement targeted measures to address the multiple and intersecting inequalities and marginalization they face as young women and girls, older women, heads of households, indigenous women, women affected by HIV/AIDS, women with disabilities and migrants, refugees and internally-displaced persons; and enhance gender-responsive rural development policies;

(c) Accelerate efforts to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence and harmful practices against rural women and girls, such as intimate partner violence, domestic violence and sexual violence, as well as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation;

(d) Undertake legislative and administrative reforms to protect and promote the right of rural women and girls to land and land tenure security and ensure their equal access to and control over productive resources and assets, other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources and financial services and technology;

(e) Ensure the full and equal participation and leadership of rural women and girls in rural development and governance, including in decision-making at all levels, and strengthen coordination between national gender equality mechanisms and other governmental institutions and collaboration with non-governmental and civil society organizations;

(f) Promote access by rural women and girls to justice, legal remedies and legal support;

Implement economic and social policies for the empowerment of rural women and girls

(g) Pursue macroeconomic policies that support smallholder agricultural production and the food security and nutrition of rural women and girls and their communities by mitigating the negative impact of international investment and trade rules;

(h) Enact economic and social policies to eradicate rural poverty and support rural women's decent work and income security, climate-resilient agricultural production and food security and nutrition;

(i) Design and implement fiscal policies that promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls by investing in essential infrastructure (ICT, sustainable energy, sustainable transport and safely managed water and sanitation) and services (care, education, health, inclusive of sexual and reproductive health, and prevention and response to violence against women);

(j) Reprioritize fiscal expenditures to extend social protection coverage to all rural women and girls and establish social protection floors to ensure access to social protection for all;

(k) Ensure the right to work and rights at work of all rural women in the informal and formal economies, and that all rural women workers are equally protected by international labour standards and national labour laws;

(l) Implement and enforce laws and regulations that uphold the principle of equal pay for work of equal value in agricultural and non-agricultural employment in rural areas;

(m) Eliminate policies and practices that condone forced labour, trafficked labour and child labour in rural areas;

(n) Undertake targeted measures to recognize and measure unpaid work performed by rural women and girls and reduce and redistribute their disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work through the equal sharing of responsibilities with rural men and boys and the provision of infrastructure (sustainable energy, sustainable transport and safely managed water and sanitation), technology and public services (accessible and quality childcare and care facilities for other dependants);

(o) Systematically measure and incorporate the value of unpaid work performed by rural women and girls, including unpaid care and domestic work, in the calculation of gross domestic product and the formulation of economic and social policies;

(p) **Facilitate the entry of rural women, especially young women, into the labour force by improving their skills, including their financial and digital literacy;**

(q) **Increase the share of trade and procurement from rural women's enterprises and cooperatives, and foster their access to local, national and international markets;**

(r) **Strengthen the capacity of rural women and girls to respond to economic, political and social shocks, conflicts and humanitarian crises by providing essential infrastructure, services, decent work and social protection;**

(s) **Build the resilience of rural women and girls to climate change and environmental degradation (deforestation, desertification and loss of agricultural biodiversity) by strengthening access to financing, sustainable energy and other technologies, information and social protection;**

(t) **Increase financial investments in quality, affordable and accessible health-care facilities and support services for rural women and girls; take measures to reduce maternal mortality rates in rural areas and increase access to quality care before, during and after childbirth; and provide comprehensive sexuality education;**

(u) **Ensure universal access by rural women and girls to sexual and reproductive health and their reproductive rights, including health-care services for family planning, and fulfil their right to have control over and decide freely and responsibly on matters related to their sexuality free of coercion, discrimination and violence;**

(v) **Strengthen HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care in rural areas, including health and social services for rural women and girls;**

(w) **Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure the full and equal participation of rural women and girls in and their completion of quality education (primary, secondary, vocational and technical), expand the scope of ICT-enabled mobile learning and literacy training and provide good school infrastructure and quality teachers in rural areas;**

(x) **Increase the capacity of national statistical offices and other relevant institutions to collect, analyse and disseminate sex- and age-disaggregated data and produce gender statistics to support policies and action for rural women and girls and to monitor and track progress towards the Goals;**

Strengthen the collective voice, leadership and decision-making of rural women and girls

(y) **Ensure that rural women and girls and their organizations fully and actively participate in the decisions, policies and institutions that affect their livelihoods, well-being and resilience;**

(z) **Protect the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining to enable rural women workers, including informal and migrant workers, to organize and join unions and participate in economic decision-making and policy formulation;**

(aa) **Support the effective participation, decision-making and leadership of rural women in women's enterprises, farmers' organizations, producer cooperatives and other civil society organizations;**

(bb) **Provide opportunties for rural girls and young women to form their own organzations to exercise voice, agency and leadership;**

46. **The Commission may wish to call upon the United Nations system and other international organizations, including international financial institutions, to work collaboratively to support Member States in implementing, measuring and monitoring the foregoing recommendations at all levels.**